

Historicism in Byzantine Thought and Literature

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MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN about how the Byzantines viewed their past, especially how they synthesized the Roman and Christian traditions to create a sacred imperial pedigree for themselves.¹ We also have many surveys of Byzantine historiography, that is, of the authors and texts that told the story of New Rome from its foundation to its final demise.² But, despite much progress in these fields, we still know little about what we might more broadly call Byzantine historical thought. The former studies focus on ideology, the latter on dates, sources, style, and bias (usually contemporary political or religious). What we lack are analyses of the underlying mental framework and the intellectual skills that guided the approach to the past, cut across genres, and shaped the way in which a rich body of evidence was ultimately represented. In other words, how was historical truth constituted? How was the raw material found in the sources, whatever its nature, cognitively processed?

In this essay I will attempt to bring to light only one aspect of what I have called Byzantine historical thought, one moreover that was not limited to the historians proper but is reflected in a diverse range of texts. It is a matter of curiosity that, although it shaped historical writing, this aspect of Byzantine historical thought is more evident in other types of literature. I label it *historicism*, a term that requires clarification in that it has stood for very different things during the past two centuries.³ I will use it here to refer to the awareness of long-term and deep historical change, in other words to the perception that the course of history fundamentally alters how people think and live and how societies are organized. In approaching the past, many Byzantines realized that they were not permitted to simply carry over their own ethical values, religious beliefs, political system, and material circumstances and apply them to the past on the assumption that they were simply universal and self-evident. Rather, they first had to historicize their own position by tracing its origins and defining its contingent

¹ See, e.g., E. Jeffreys, "The Attitudes of Byzantine Chronicles towards Ancient History," *Byzantion* 49 (1979): 199–238. For what the past looked like to a Byzantine historian around 800, see I. Ševčenko, "The Search for the Past in Byzantium around the Year 800," *DOP* 46 (1992): 279–93.

² I am referring to the surveys of K. Krumbacher, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Litteratur von Justinian bis zum Ende des oströmischen Reiches (527–1453)* (Munich, 1891); H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1978); and A. Karpozilos, *Βυζαντινοὶ ἱστορικοὶ καὶ Χρονογράφοι*,

2 vols. (Athens, 1997–2002). A new multi-volume survey is being prepared by W. Treadgold, *The Early Byzantine Historians* (New York, 2007).

³ For a survey, see G. G. Iggers, "Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56 (1995): 129–52.

existential scope, and then to do the same regarding the people of the past about whom they wanted to write.

This recognition, whether made in Byzantium or in early modern times, is a positive achievement and may even be called a breakthrough if it attains the level of conscious reflection and systematic application; it then gives rise to what modern philosophers call “the historical sense.” Other forms of historicism emerge from this but should be treated separately—for instance the modern notion that any philosophical system of the past cannot simply be true, given that, in the end, it merely reflects the “age” in which it was produced. The first is a factual observation about history, the latter a strongly relativist philosophical conclusion (that perhaps has yet to be proven).⁴ The philosophical thesis, however, has greatly influenced the historical scholarship from which it originated, especially in Byzantine studies. Even when studying authors of the past who are not primarily philosophers, scholars casually assume that their works must be “limited” by their “age” and must therefore reflect its intellectual shortcomings. Though true in a general sense, in practice this assumption unfortunately becomes an exercise in a priori reasoning, because we often know little about any past “age” to begin with. Thus long-standing prejudices against Byzantine literature and the “mental limitations” of its writers, coupled with dated Hegelian generalizations about the Mind of this or that People, are introduced to fill the gap between the historicist imperative and what scholars actually know—this abuse of the historical sense often leads to a misunderstanding of the authors in question and betrays the laudable original intention to understand them in their authentic context.⁵

Historicism—here defined strictly and limited to the avoidance of anachronism in examining the past, and to a sense of the fundamental difference of that past—is widely believed to be an essentially modern development. One “knows,” for instance, that it was the humanists of the Italian Renaissance who first cultivated the historical sense. Acutely aware that they were creating new modes of expression and thought, and believing at the same time that they were recreating those of antiquity, they were led to postulate (or invent) the three periods of European history that we still use, each of which was supposed to have a distinctive style and values. Historical boundaries now had to be observed and so humanism “overcame . . . the ancient vision of a static

4 For arguments that philosophical historicism is not necessarily correct (though not that it is necessarily false), see (still) L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953), chap. 1. For a survey of postmodern philosophical historicism, see P. Hamilton, *Historicism* (London, 1996).

5 See, e.g., A. Kaldellis, “The Historical and Religious Views of Agathias: A Reinterpretation,” *Byzantion* 69 (1999): 206–52, here 251–52.

reality, rigid and unchanging.”⁶ Anachronism had to be avoided and the original evidence consulted. The passion for antiquity led to an interest in its material remains, which were now brought to bear on the understanding of the past. Furthermore, the very awareness of change made history an existential predicament and eventually prompted new philosophies: “not only did the government and princes vary, but the laws, the customs, the mode of life, the religion, the language, the dress, the names. . . . men too, once Caesars and Pompeys, have become Peters, Johns, and Matthews.” So Machiavelli.⁷

To be sure, recent scholarship has shown that many writers and artists of the Renaissance chose to disregard the critical methods being pioneered in their time and routinely violated the developing historical sense for a variety of “creative” reasons. It was probably not until the nineteenth century that the historical sense became fully ingrained, when Nietzsche called it our modern “sixth sense.”⁸ This development may be explained partly by the extremely rapid changes of our times, which create conditions of instant historical “otherness” and alienation. Never before has so much depended on history, a fact that may partly explain why ancient and medieval thinkers did not go so far as we have in this direction. Simply put, for them much less changed over the course of centuries and millennia: “The guidelines of Mediterranean life as the art of the possible could be summed up in the writings of Homer precisely because no discontinuity even remotely like that to which a modern, post-industrial society can be exposed had come between the men of the fourth century [A.D.] and their models.”⁹ Yet even if late modernity is the only era that instinctively historicizes everything, allowing “History” to exercise such a powerful dominion over philosophy, the historical sense was not altogether lacking in the past, a conclusion that is sometimes asserted with little nuance or concession. Our survey of Byzantine literature below will in fact uncover “a general picture of humans as embedded in a web of cultural practices, which differ profoundly from epoch to epoch and place to place.”¹⁰ Personally, I doubt that any human beings who have ancestral traditions (that change inevitably) and foreign neighbors (who are inevitably different) can lack a historical sense of this kind. Some ancient Egyptians, for example, realized that Egyptian art had passed through different stages and at times made conscious efforts to

6 E. Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance*, trans. P. Munz (Oxford, 1965), 8; see also Garin, *Medioevo e Rinascimento: Studi e Ricerche* (Bari, 1954), 158, 201–10. The standard discussion in English is by P. Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (New York,

1970), who cites many supporting texts (the book is virtually an anthology).

7 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories* 1.5, trans. L. F. Banfield and H. C. Mansfield (Princeton, 1988), 14–15.

8 See P. Levine, *Nietzsche and the Modern Crisis of the Humanities* (New York,

1995), 25–26 for context.

9 P. Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1982), 92 (on whether the emperor Julian’s infatuation with Homer was atavistic).

10 Levine, *Nietzsche*, 25.

revive past forms. “The Egyptians of the fourth century B.C. . . had the greatest historical perspective. The Late Period favored archaism in various media,” which was practiced with such skill, that is, with self-conscious awareness of change, that it has “tricked many modern experts into thinking it was from the Old Kingdom.”¹¹ Such a ruse could hardly be pulled off by people “trapped” in their own “age.”

Finally—to return for the last time to the philosophical implications of historicism in modern thought—we should not “blame” or look down upon the Byzantines or any other premodern intellectual cultures for not recognizing the inherent historicity of human thought, especially because that historicity has yet to be proven in a philosophically rigorous way.

The main part of this study will proceed as follows. First, a group of texts from the twelfth century will be presented which reveal how developed the historical sense could be among some Byzantine writers. After that a number of factors will be offered by way of explanation: what was it about Byzantine intellectual culture that collectively enabled this degree of sophistication? I will present additional examples of historicism in literature and thought under those headings. Certainly others have studied aspects of this problem, in connection with individual authors or periods, especially the twelfth century,¹² but so far there has been no systematic study of the sources and methods of historicism in Byzantium. I offer such a study here in recognition of the dramatic but still only partial swing in current opinion in favor of the Byzantines’ cultural productions. I have linked it to the more widely debated philosophical problems of memory and history in the hope that the Byzantines may one day have a say in broader debates.

The texts I have selected for immediate attention are the three romance novels of the twelfth century, written probably in the 1140s: Theodoros Prodromos’s *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*; Eustathios (or Eumathios) Makrembolites’ *Hysmine and Hysminias*; and Niketas Eugenianos’s *Drosilla and Charikles*. A fourth novel, Konstantinos Manasses’ *Aristandros and Kallithea*, survives only in fragments and will not be discussed. The texts are between nine and eleven books long or about 120 pages; they are told in the third person and in verse, except for *Hysmine and Hysminias*, which is in first-person prose. Moreover all have the same basic plot, which is that of the ancient romance novels that they all imitate: a young couple in love run away and are separated

11 Ph. Vasunia, *The Gift of the Nile: Hellenizing Egypt from Aeschylus to Alexander* (Berkeley, 2001), 129–30; see also I. Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford, 2000), 357–58 for archaizing art in the Third Intermediate Period.

12 Especially R. Macrides and P. Magdalino, “The Fourth Kingdom and the Rhetoric of Hellenism,” in *The Perception of the Past in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. P. Magdalino (London, 1992), 117–56.

by pirates, barbarians, shipwrecks, or wars, yet amazingly they manage to preserve their virginity. Along the way they make friends (who have had similar experiences) and finally reunite and marry. Despite this similarity in outline, the novels are highly varied and idiosyncratic; conceptually they might be worlds apart. *Eugenianos* focuses more on the elaboration of the plot; *Makrembolites* on the subjective experience of *eros*, though his underlying theme is the second-order relationship among *eros*, nature, and art (*technē*), especially the art of the novelist; and *Prodromos* takes as his themes war and religion. While *Makrembolites* is more “artistic” in both treatment and subject matter, *Prodromos* is more philosophical, imitating Platonic dialogues and discussing themes of political philosophy.¹³

The trend is toward more scholarly attention to these novels—to their generic complexity; to their allusions to ancient literature and intertextual use of the ancient novels in particular; and to their literary motifs and strategies. We will not discuss these aspects here, except to the degree required by our chief theme. The key feature of the novels for our purposes is that they are learned; that is, they are imitations of an ancient genre, near-perfect ones in fact, though they are in verse rather than prose (except for *Makrembolites*). They are written in classical Greek, set in an unspecified period of pre-Roman Hellenic antiquity, and required a high level of scholarship, literary and historical, such as existed only in Byzantium in the twelfth century. The sheer self-consciousness of this enterprise is remarkable. As a general rule, no contemporary or Christian references disrupt the Hellenist illusion. The novelists do not openly acknowledge the chronological and religious gap that lies between them and their models—a strategy that enables, or requires, their readers to imagine themselves among the (pagan and Greek) readers of the original novels. Of course we, along with the original audience, know perfectly well that much has happened in a thousand years and so we look for hints. The novels oblige, albeit never obviously. As we will see, contemporary allusions are deliberate and executed with great skill. In addition, indirect references to the authors themselves emphasize the distance that separates these fictions from their Byzantine creators. For instance *Eugenianos* has one of his *characters* claim as his own models heroes from the ancient novels (6.386–390, 440–451), saying that they lived “long ago.”¹⁴ But how long ago can they

13 The novels are conveniently published with Italian translation in F. Conca, *Il romanzo bizantino del XII secolo* (Turin, 1994). For a general introduction, see R. Beaton, *The Medieval Greek Romance*. 2nd ed. (London, 1996), chaps. 4–5, which is outdated in some respects; for various

arguments regarding the novels’ relative and absolute chronology, *ibid.*, 79–81, 211–12; and P. A. Agapitos, “Poets and Painters: Theodoros Prodromos’ Dedicatory Verses of His Novel to an Anonymous Caesar,” *JÖB* 50 (2000): 173–85, here 181, 184–85.

14 For literary readings of these exempla, see C. Jouanno, “Nicetas Eugenianos, un héritier du roman grec,” *REG* 102 (1989): 346–60, here 350–53; J. Burton, “Reviving the Pagan Greek Novel in a Christian World,” *GRBS* 39 (1998): 179–216, here 257–59.

have lived in this timeless world? Spoken by one of the characters about the *author's* models, this claim in fact alludes to the chronological gap separating Eugenianos from *his* predecessors. Likewise, at the end of Makrembolites' novel, the first-person narrator assumes a detached perspective and wonders who might possess such a perfect "Atticizing" style as could faithfully reflect the wondrous nature of the events that transpired (11.19). He expresses the hope that even if the other gods do not establish eternal memorials to his love, the arts of Hermes will enable "one who is born much later" to immortalize them through the power of rhetoric (11.22). The narrator thus alludes to the author, specifically to his rhetorical skill that we are meant to admire.¹⁵

As a setting in which to develop their deeper and broader themes regarding *eros* and *logos*, the novelists recreated an image of antiquity free of anachronism, chiefly of reference to Christianity and to their own Byzantine world. This rule is occasionally broken, though almost always deliberately. To achieve this effect, they had to deploy formidable scholarly skills and knowledge of antiquity, put themselves in a classical frame of mind, and fashion an illusion that could convince exacting peers and patrons. This means, among other things, that they had a highly developed historical sense. It might be objected that what the novelists were imitating were the ancient novels themselves and not life in antiquity directly, and there is some truth in this. However, it is unlikely that they could have succeeded in this experiment unless it were informed by a high level of independent historical scholarship, for the Byzantine novels are not restricted in their plots, settings, situations, dialogue, and characters to the equivalents that are found in the ancient novels. In other words, the artificial Hellenic world of the Byzantine novels could not be simulated so well merely by imitation of the ancient novels themselves. Besides we have independent evidence about at least one of the novelists, Prodrornos, who was a first-rate classical scholar.¹⁶ And we will discuss below in more detail what kind of education the ability to write in classical Greek already presupposed in Byzantium.

What did this historicism entail in practice? First, the novels are thoroughly and obsessively pagan. Not only do the protagonists, with whom we are apparently meant to sympathize, believe in the gods; they are constantly talking about them, praying to them, holding festivals in their honor, and yes, even sacrificing to them. It is possible that this religiosity exceeds that in the ancient novels, going well beyond the day-to-day piety of the ancient world itself. But on the whole the novelists get the details right. Modern criticism on this point is either too strict or subjective in evaluating what is "authentically" ancient, what Byzantine, and what the product of mimesis of the ancient novels.¹⁷ It is important that the novelists do not apologize or ever comment on

15 See Beaton, *Medieval Greek Romance*, 86–87; Agapitos, "Poets and Painters," 183–84.

16 See, in general, A. Kazhdan (in collaboration with S. Franklin), *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1984), chap. 3.

17 Macrides and Magdalino, "The Fourth Kingdom," 151; R. E. Harder, "Religion und Glaube in den Romanen der Komnenenzeit," in *Der Roman im Byzanz der Komnenenzeit: Referate des Internationalen Symposiums an der Freien Universität Berlin, 3 bis 6 April 1998*, ed. P. A. Agapitos and D. R. Reinsch (Frankfurt am Main, 2000), 55–80, here 69–72 (perhaps too strict); and C. Jouanno, "A Byzantine Novelist Staging the Ancient Greek World: Presence, Form, and Function of Antiquity in Makrembolites' *Hysmine and Hysminias*," in *Ἡ πρόσληψη τῆς ἀρχαιότητος στὸ βυζαντινὸ μυθιστόρημα*, ed. S. Kaklamanis and M. Paschalis (Athens, 2005), 17–29.

their characters' religion (as did, say, the poet of *Beowulf*, who likewise wrote about pagan heroes for a Christian society). Furthermore, taking this ancient world at face value requires accepting its religion as *virtuous*. Cities and individuals are praised for their piety. There is no sign that the narrators do not themselves believe in the gods, which places their Christian readers in the position of having to suspend, not their disbelief, but precisely their *belief* in order to enjoy the fiction. By speaking in the first person, Makrembolites compounds the illusion by making us view the world through the eyes of Hysminias and partake directly of the paganism in which he is steeped (Hysminias is a sacred herald). What Prodhomos does is even bolder, in that he speaks in the third person but makes many comments throughout that imply his *own* belief in the pagan gods and their benevolence (e.g., 1.65–67: it was reasonable that a goddess should help the Rhodians; 6.84–88: one cannot escape fate, for the gods are everywhere, etc.). This radically disjoins the actual author from his authorial persona and presents us with a narrator-author who *chooses* to act pagan, even if only for the purposes of one work (a choice that Makrembolites' pagan first-person narrator does not have, "trapped" as he is in a pagan age). Finally, the characters and narrators firmly believe that the gods intervene in their stories and sometimes they do just that, though usually indirectly, through dreams, omens, oracles, and miracles.¹⁸

Timeless fictions that do not reflect contemporary mentalities make modern historians, who are historicists themselves, uncomfortable. Efforts have accordingly been made to historicize the novels by discovering in them allusions to Christian and Byzantine realities. These findings are generally plausible, but we must be careful in evaluating them. First, we must accept that the setting of the novels is utterly unlike that of the Byzantine authors themselves, being Greek rather than Roman; pagan rather than Christian; and, with the exception of Prodhomos, based on city-states, not empires. The polarities of their moral universe are also those of the ancient novels and not of Byzantium: chance versus providence, slavery versus freedom, town vs. country, Hellenism vs. barbarism, nature vs. *technē*. Everyday life, social relations, and manners of speech likewise do not correspond to the experience of any Byzantine. The novelists even used ancient and archaic expressions that were not current in Byzantium to enhance the illusion of authenticity.¹⁹

¹⁸ A dream sent by Dionysos: Niketas Eugenianos, *Drosilla and Charikles* 6.664–668; the regular miracle of Artemis's statue: Eustathios Makrembolites, *Hysmine and Hysminias* 8.7, 11.17; an (apparent) omen sent by Zeus: *ibid.*, 6.10, 10.11; an oracle of

Apollo: *ibid.*, 10.13; a dolphin sent by Hermes (?): *ibid.*, 11.14; Selene saves Kratandros in the fire: Theodoros Prodhomos, *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* 1.386–393; a Delphic oracle: *ibid.*, 9.190–233.

¹⁹ A. Basilikopoulou-Ioannidou,

Ἡ ἀναγέννησις τῶν γραμμάτων κατὰ τὸν IB' αἰῶνα εἰς τὸ Βυζάντιον καὶ ὁ Ὅμηρος (Athens, 1971–1972), 85; for the question of what world the novels reflect exactly, see Beaton, *Medieval Greek Romance*, esp. 183 (above, n. 13).

Aside from Prodhromos,²⁰ what purpose do Christian allusions serve in the novels? In the case of Makrembolites, they are faint, consisting of the practice of foot washing (which is not exclusively Christian) and some language that possibly echoes the sufferings of the martyrs. Their purpose, in any case, is literary; that is, they are either merely illustrative or subordinated to the development of the novel's own themes. They suggest no conclusions about Christian topics.²¹ The case of Eugenianos is slightly more complex. We have, for instance, erotic language that seems to echo the Song of Songs; a character declaring that a god had brought the young couple together and asking, "Who can separate those whom a god has united?" (3.12, also 7.264; alluding to Matthew 19:6); and a marriage at the end that, contrary to ancient practice, takes place inside a temple with the priest presiding (we find this in Prodhromos as well). But these allusions are too few and ambiguous to establish "a Christian context" for the novels "despite the ostensibly antique settings."²² As we have seen, the context was thoroughly pagan. No reader would have concluded that these characters were Christians at heart, given that they constantly say such things as, "I give thanks to you, son of Zeus, the greatest of the gods" (8.73–74). Their polytheism is too explicit for "Zeus" to be a classicizing name for the Christian God (by contrast, the poet of *Beowulf*, once he acknowledges that his heroes are pagans, has them talk about God thereafter as though they were not). No, Eugenianos was not trying to make his readers more "comfortable" with the material. Drosilla refers to the god in question, Dionysos, as *anax*, not *kyrie* as a Christian would (7.210). We are dealing here with a thoroughly pagan context that must necessarily denature and subvert any Christian references that are worked into it. For example one scholar has suggested that Eugenianos was interpreting "the Song of Solomon sexually and literally ... against orthodox opinion."²³ Jesus' words on marriage are likewise used in connection with erotic infatuation inspired by Dionysos that leads to elopement; the same line is used again toward the end of the work, only now it has become "those whom the *gods* have joined" (9.186). In Eugenianos's fiction, the gods prevail in the end.

Because the study of the novels is in its infancy, we do not know whether they were meant to suggest general arguments about pagan and Christian practices and beliefs. Here we are interested only in

20 I intend to discuss *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* in more detail in a separate study on *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, 2007).

21 Burton, "Reviving the Pagan Greek Novel," 208–13 (above, n. 14). P. Roilos,

(*Amphoteroglossia: A Poetics of the Twelfth-Century Medieval Greek Novel* [Washington, D.C., 2005], 210–23) has recently argued for extensive use of the Song of Songs in Eugenianos.

22 Pace E. Jeffreys, "The Depiction of Female Sensibilities in the Twelfth Century,"

in *To Byzántio órimo gia allagés: Epilogés, evaisθhσίς και τρόποι έκφρασης από τον ενδέκατο στον δέκατο πέμπτο αιώνα*, ed. Ch. G. Angelidi (Athens, 2004), 73–85, here 83.

23 Burton, "Reviving the Pagan Greek Novel," 203 (above, n. 14).

their implicit historicism, in how they carefully avoided anachronism. A few lapses may be allowed. One scholar has suggested that the temple-marriage in Prodomos resolves the problems created by Rhodanthe's abduction and situates the novel in contemporary Byzantine debates.²⁴ On the other hand, it is possible that this was an actual anachronism, for the classical texts typically read by Byzantine scholars do not specify the institutions of Greek marriage. On the whole, however, the historicist achievement of the novels is impressive; nothing like it would be possible in the West for many centuries. We can see this if we compare them to the contemporary Old French (vernacular) *romans d'antiquité*. So far these different traditions—Western and Byzantine—have been studied in tandem only in attempts to discover which “influenced” the other. Current scholarship tends (rightly, in my view) to regard them as independent or largely independent internal developments.²⁵ Whatever tenuous prosopographical or chronological links may be established between their patrons, in the end they remain very different kinds of literary exercise. The *romans* are vernacular and depict a world that is quite thoroughly medieval despite their ostensible ancient setting. Little or no historical scholarship influenced their composition, beyond a familiarity with Latin epic. The comparison, then, is like that between the historical novels of Robert Graves and the episodes of Xena, Warrior Princess. A fairer comparison would be with Walter of Châtillon's Latin epic on Alexander (late twelfth century), which imitated Vergil and Lucan and “demonstrates a sophisticated sense of the past and its difference from the present.”²⁶ Still, its reconstruction of ancient mentalities and realia is shaky and its Christian outlook is, in contrast to the Byzantine novels, pervasive and intrusive. Walter is uninterested in keeping the twelfth century out of his ancient setting, though he could probably have done so had he set his mind to it.

So what enabled Byzantine writers to compose novels that most classicists today, given a blind test, would fail to identify as Byzantine, but would safely classify as pagan and ancient? The remainder of this study will present some of the general and specific aspects of Byzantine intellectual life that contributed to this achievement. It will not be possible to give exhaustive documentation for them; our goal is only to understand how a historical sense emerged and how it found expression in various sites of Byzantine literary culture. I must stress at the outset that the novels were *scholarly* achievements, written by men who had

24 J. Burton, “Abduction and Elopement in the Byzantine Novel,” *GRBS* 41 (2000): 377–409, here 405–8. The episode of trial by fire in Prodomos was certainly an intentional anachronism; it will be discussed in the separate study of that work mentioned above.

25 Cf. E. Jeffreys, “The Comnenian Background to the *Romans d'Antiquité*,” *Byzantion* 50 (1980): 455–86 with P. Magdalino, “Eros the King and the King of Amours: Some Observations on *Hysmine and Hysminias*,” *DOP* 46 (1992): 197–204.

26 M. K. Lafferty, *Walter of Châtillon's Alexandreis: Epic and the Problem of Historical Understanding* (Turnhout, 1998), 61. I thank Tia Kolbaba for this reference.

spent a good portion of their lives studying ancient literature and who, as philologists and students of philosophy, rival their modern counterparts. The age of the novels was also the age of Ioannes Tzetzes and Eustathios of Thessalonike. Amazingly this learned aspect of Byzantine culture has received almost no attention in our times. Prejudice, and the inherent philological difficulty of the topic, has ensured that the world and the mind of the Byzantine classical scholar has remained in the dark for us. The single monograph on the topic is so hostile to its subject that the reader can scarcely find a page that does not contrive some way to dismiss Byzantine scholars as idiotic and incompetent.²⁷

Let us return to the Byzantine view of the past, mentioned at the beginning of this study. As we saw above, the historical sense emerges along with the experience of fundamental historical change, whether this is aesthetic and rhetorical as during the Renaissance or political and economic as during the Industrial Revolution. Such transformations, however subjectively they may be experienced, divide History into Periods, during each of which the parameters of human existence are believed to be radically different in some important way from what came before and what came afterward. One such transformation that shaped the Byzantine view of the past was of course the conversion of the ancient world to Christianity. Whenever one chose to date it exactly, it marked a clear break not merely in the modes of human worship but in God's overall plan for the salvation of humanity. The change was as "objective," that is, metaphysically rooted in the nature of the universe, as could be imagined. By itself it sufficed to abolish any notion of a uniform, unbroken past, and even set the stage for a number of historicist exercises. For what else may we call the tale of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesos, who fell asleep in a cave during the Decian persecutions of the mid-third century and awoke some two hundred years later in the Christian empire of Theodosios II? Such a premise was perfectly designed to elicit reflection on what had changed in the meantime. In one version, one of the youths named Iamblichos runs into trouble when he tries to buy food with Decian coins.²⁸ It is not surprising that one of the most successful modern exponents of "the definitively Late Antique style of religious, cultural, and social life" began one of his books by declaring that "I wish that I had been one of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesos."²⁹

The convulsions and anguish of the long transformation from paganism to Christianity left a deep and permanent mark on Byzantium, whose scholars, we must remember, spent most of their time in the company of pagan texts, a preference that sometimes resulted in anxiety attacks. This is not the place to discuss the reception of Greek wisdom in Orthodox Byzantium. Suffice it to say that the "otherness" of the pagan inheritance was never forgotten and never

27 N. G. Wilson, *Scholars of Byzantium* (London, 1983).

28 *Memoir of the Seven Young Men of Ephesos*, in PG 115:427–448.

29 P. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 1.

fully overcome, which spurred the historicist imagination by creating fault lines and requiring the special treatment of antiquity. Of course many Byzantines were content to simply dismiss the pagans of antiquity, both the average ancient Greek or Roman and the famous writers. In some circles, though, many of the authors were exempted from this blanket condemnation due to their literary perfection (e.g., Homer) or moral proximity to Scripture (e.g., Plato). All this is well known. What is more interesting, however, is that some Byzantine scholars went even farther by attempting to rehabilitate classical pagans in general based on their historicist view of the past and often in times of crisis, when the Byzantine Empire seemed on the verge of collapse. At such times these scholars questioned the premises of their own culture and wondered why the ancients, who were pagans and thus could not have benefited from God's grace, had fared so much better.

Around 1080 A.D., the jurist and high official Michael Attaleiates completed a *History* in which he recounted and tried to explain the dramatic decline of the empire in the eleventh century. This work has unfortunately received little attention. Yet in a fascinating digression, Attaleiates wonders why Byzantine generals were miserable failures when their ancient Roman counterparts were glorious victors. We need not expound on every nuance of this complex argument. Attaleiates concedes that the ancient Romans knew nothing of God's logos, of the Incarnation, and of the religious conditions of the new dispensation (which he lists), but still they managed to prevail over their enemies because of a "natural greatness of mind." More important for our purposes, Attaleiates then argues that the ancient Romans faithfully adhered to their own customs and the ritual demands of their own religion (which, as a Roman jurist, he knew fairly well); thus they entered battle in high spirits.³⁰ This rehabilitation hinges on the ability to enter the foreign mindset of a distantly related people and view the world through their customs and values, which satisfies the modern definition of historicism as "a general picture of humans as embedded in a web of cultural practices, which differ profoundly from epoch to epoch and place to place."³¹ It also reveals a willingness, even if only theoretical, to prefer "foreign" cultural practices on pragmatic grounds.

One century later the student of Eustathios and bishop of Athens Michael Choniates found himself in a similar situation. Witnessing the rapid disintegration of the empire from a provincial standpoint, his love of antiquity, which, up to that point, had remained bound within the aesthetic limits imposed by his faith, began to take on an active existential role and challenged the confidence of his Christian optimism. Up to then, in his sermons to the people of Athens, he had granted the superiority of the ancients in many respects, but had always maintained that "we" are more blessed on account of the Christian

30 Michael Attaleiates, *History* 193–195, ed. and trans. I. Polemis (Athens, 1997), 338–43. See A. Kaldellis, "A Byzantine Argument for the Equivalence of All Religions: Michael Attaleiates on Ancient and Modern Romans," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 14 (2007): 1–20.

31 Levine, *Nietzsche*, 25.

faith, which was so far superior to that of the ancients. Yet imperial decline and administrative corruption and indifference took a heavy toll on this view. In an angry letter to an official in Constantinople who, in Choniates' view, was not doing enough to help the provincials, the bishop of Athens exclaims on the blessedness of "those men," that is, the ancient Greeks. "I do not reproach them for their distorted religion," he bursts out, "but rather call them blessed because even though they worshipped in this way they practiced virtue and beauty, daring the sea and long trips so as to order and adorn human life." This letter is important for our thesis because, as noted, in many of his sermons Choniates had set up the ancient Greeks and his own contemporary Christians as two different cultural "paradigms" that involved different virtues and beliefs, the former worldly, the latter spiritual. Apparently he was personally capable of switching between them, at least to a degree, especially when he realized that the empire needed much more "worldly" virtue if it was to survive. And, like many modern historians, he was prepared to "forgive" the ancients their vices based on an understanding of their "age" and values that served them so well. He evaluated and redeemed the Greeks by applying a historical and comparative perspective.³²

In the case of Choniates and other Byzantines who wrote about the Athens of their time, this historical perspective was deeply shaped by the ruins of antiquity. The sheer contrast between the classical glory of the ancient city, which they had imagined through their education, and the physical decay of the ancient city, which they beheld when they first saw it in the eleventh and twelfth century, stimulated their historical sense and caused them to ponder the fateful gap that lay between them and sage antiquity. What was left of all that glory? Did Athens now have any redeeming qualities to make up for all it had lost? And, toward the end of the twelfth century, why were the ancients virtuous and victorious whereas we are so wretched and worthless? Laments and nostalgia amid the ruins played a large role in pushing these thoughts to the fore, as they would later for the nineteenth-century European travelers, who have unfairly received the credit—if that is the right word—for imagining Romantic Hellenism. The bishops of Athens and their correspondents in the twelfth century were stimulated by the ancient ruins into asking these "deep" historical questions, even if they usually did not produce interesting answers (at least, unlike the European travelers, they did not give vent to racist prejudices). To this degree, then, we should be more cautious in accepting blanket statements such as that the Byzantines "had no perception of history as archaeology."³³

In this context it is significant that Choniates seems to have commissioned a painting of Athens in the classical period, a work

32 Michael Choniates, *Letter* 50.42–46, in *Michaelis Choniatae Epistulae*, ed. F. Kolovou (Berlin, 2001), 69. See Macrides and Magdalino, "The Fourth Kingdom," 141–44 (above, n. 12). For Theodoros Metochites on the Greeks, see A. Garzya, "Byzantium," in *Perceptions of the Ancient Greeks*, ed. K. Dover (Oxford, 1992), 29–53, here 32–36.

33 P. A. Agapitos, "Byzantium in the Poetry of Kostis Palamas and C. P. Cavafy," *Κάμπος: Cambridge Papers in Modern Greek* 2 (Cambridge, 1994): 1–20, here 6, citing C. Mango. I examine the archaeological imagination of Byzantine Athens in a study on *The Christian Parthenon: Classicism and Pilgrimage in Byzantine Athens* (Cambridge, 2008).

highlighting its ancient monuments and political institutions.³⁴ This would certainly tell us much about how and to what degree the present argument about Byzantine historicism applied also to the realm of art, a general problem that I do not treat in the present discussion.

The transition from paganism to Christianity was not the only major rupture in the Byzantine view of the historical continuum. There was also the transition from the dispensation of the Old Testament to that of the New Testament. The Byzantines accepted the Old Testament as an expression of God's will and law but believed that the Mosaic Law had effectively been annulled by the Incarnation. How, then, could it be explained that God had gone to all that trouble in the first place and had not just revealed the full extent of His Word from the beginning? The solution proposed for this dilemma by prominent theologians such as Eusebios of Caesarea rested on historicist premises. Roughly put, when it is understood spiritually, the Old Testament does in fact contain the entire Christian message, and many of the ancient Patriarchs understood its full implications. But God did not deem the "childish and imperfect" race of the Jews to be ready for this revelation and so, through Moses, he communicated it to them in an imperfect way, through the "external props" of the Law, which was "necessary in the historical circumstances."³⁵ This, the Byzantines would later accept, was one stage in God's prudent management—*oikonomia*—of human salvation. Likewise Theodoros the Stoudite raised the distinction between the Age of Law and the Age of Grace in rebutting iconoclast arguments that were based on the prohibition of graven images in the Old Testament.³⁶ Again we see history divided into periods to which different rules, both human and divine, are supposed to apply. One cannot judge people in the past, in this case the Israelites, by an absolute standard, but must make concessions for the limitations of their "age." In this case their religion is found to be false when judged by absolute standards, but relatively true when viewed in historicist perspective.

Eusebios framed this argument within an overall theory of the evolution of human society from savagery to civilized religion. Later Byzantines had available to them other such theories that invoked the different stages of history, each subject to a different set of "rules." Plato in book 3 of the *Laws* and Polybios in book 6 of the *Histories* produced schematic versions of the ascent of humanity from

34 P. Speck, "Eine byzantinische Darstellung der antiken Stadt Athen," *Ελληνικά* 28 (1975): 415–18.

35 T. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (London, 1981), 184–85, citing previous discussions; see also 101, 181. For Julian's attack on the double standard that

Christians seemed to apply to the Old Testament, see R. L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, 1984), 184–96. For periodizations in the Christian view of history, see, in general, H. Inglebert, *Interpretatio Christiana: Les mutations des savoirs (cosmographie, géographie, ethnogra-*

phie, histoire) dans l'Antiquité chrétienne, 30–630 après J.-C. (Paris, 2001), 512–22.

36 Theodoros the Stoudite, *First Refutation of the Iconoclasts* 5, in PG 99: 333. See, in general, K. Parry, *Depicting the Word: Byzantine Iconophile Thought of the Eighth and Ninth Centuries* (Leiden, 1996), 49.

savagery to civil society and on to history proper. Such theories certainly inspired at least one later Byzantine version, a little-known treatise by Eustathios of Thessalonike, in which natural progress accounts for much and God, comparatively speaking, “plays a remarkably minor role.” The Mosaic Law (whose flaws are not explained) and the Incarnation account for only two of the many stages of progress in this account. Moreover, Eustathios suggests that his own Christian society was reverting to a level of barbarism below the stage of virtue formerly attained by human beings on the basis of their natural talents alone.³⁷

The details of these theories do not concern us here—only their testimony that the Byzantines had a developed “historical sense” and realized that different periods had to be understood and judged by different standards. This skill came in handy in unexpected contexts. For example, “both in countering the papal claims, and in attempting to update their own house rules, apologists and canonists of the church of Constantinople made great use of the argument of historical relativity—that ‘things were different then’ in the days of the early church councils, when Rome was still an imperial capital and paganism was still rife.”³⁸ Not only did they realize that important matters had changed within the Church; they seemed willing and capable of interpreting the canons according to the modes and orders of the past, when men and “the times” were different.³⁹

We have, then, in various (usually polemical) contexts a recognition that great changes had occurred even within Christian history itself and not only between the pagan past and the advent of the new faith. To the degree that the Old Testament was a part of Christian history, it represented a different dispensation of God’s grace. The same was true of the Apostolic age, when the Holy Spirit was believed to have been more actively present than in later periods. This age was very distinct, at least in the Christian categorization of history, and could be used as a conceptual springboard for defining later ages. St. Thecla, for instance, the follower of St. Paul, was claimed by her fifth-century hagiographer as among the first saints of the age that immediately followed upon that of the Apostles, and the first among women

37 Kazhdan (with Franklin), *Studies on Byzantine Literature*, 178–80 (above, n. 18). The text is Eustathios of Thessalonike, *On the Obedience Appropriate to a Christian Regime* (Or. 3), ed. T. L. F. Tafel, *Eustathii metropolitae Thessalonicensis Opuscula* (1832; repr. Amsterdam: A. M. Hakkert, 1964), 13–29.

38 Macrides and Magdalino, “The Fourth Kingdom,” 145 (above, n. 12).

39 R. Macrides, “Perception of the Past in the Twelfth-Century Canonists,” in *To Byzántio katá ton 12o aióna: Kanονικό δίκαιο, κράτος και κοινωνία*, ed. N. Oikonomides (Athens, 1991), 589–99, esp. 591: “a sense of context and relativity.”

generally.⁴⁰ But that age was brief and its uniqueness was more a function of God's plan than of human history. Another moment of greatness, with which the Byzantines identified even though they knew that it was irretrievably lost, was the reign of Constantine and the period of the ecumenical Christian empire in general (which we now call the later Roman empire or late antiquity). All educated Byzantines knew that their empire had once encompassed the whole of Christendom and had been genuinely multiethnic, not limited to the Greek-speaking inhabitants of the Balkans and Asia Minor. During that time the Church Fathers had governed the Church, and the Councils had defined the faith and defeated the heretics. The figure of Constantine often stood in for the whole period and, because of his foundation of the new capital, was the chief source of legitimacy for the Byzantine Empire in the middle period. A collected volume has been published on the continual renewal of his image in later periods.⁴¹ Even Justinian, not a popular emperor in later periods, served as a model in the twelfth century for the Italian ambitions of the emperor Manuel I Komnenos.⁴²

We must be careful in evaluating the significance of this period for the present discussion. It is one thing to cite a great emperor of the past like Constantine as a legitimating authority for the present and to produce a legal argument as to why someone in particular deserves to inherit his title; or to consciously imitate the art and literature of a glorious past age, as happened often in later Byzantine centuries. But it is another thing to explicitly formulate a historicist theory regarding a certain segment of the past. The study has not yet been written on how later Byzantines viewed the Christian empire of late antiquity, or to what degree they managed to synthesize its various elements into a coherent whole in their minds. To my knowledge later Byzantine writers rarely commented on what the loss of the West to the barbarians and the loss of the East to the Arabs had really meant and what fundamental historical changes those events had introduced. With the Arabs they certainly did not enter into debate on the matter. But in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries they had to confront the encroachments of a western Europe that claimed many of the same political and cultural origins as the Byzantines did. This forced many to think hard about the overall trajectory of East-West relations and about the cultural changes that those relations presupposed. In a treatise *Against the Latins*, the statesman and historian Georgios Akropolites

40 S. F. Johnson, *The Life and Miracles of Thekla: A Literary Study* (Washington, D.C., 2006), 21–23. For the effort to fashion a sense of continuous revelation that approximated the one granted to the Apostles, see J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*:

Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes (New York, 1979), 9–10.

41 P. Magdalino, ed., *New Constantines: The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th–13th Centuries; Papers from the Twenty-Sixth Spring Symposium*

of Byzantine Studies, St. Andrews, March 1992 (Aldershot, U.K.).

42 P. Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180* (Cambridge, 1993), passim.

(1217–1282) tried to find a common ground between the Byzantines and the “Italians.” He found it in precisely the period of late antiquity, when Greeks and Latins had fused together into a single, Roman, and Christian commonwealth. He concludes his treatise with a remarkable passage that should be better known:

*It seems, O Italians, that you no longer remember our ancient harmony. ... But no other nations were ever as harmonious as the Graikoi and the Italians. And this was only to be expected, for science and learning came to the Italians from the Graikoi. And after that point, so that they need not use their ethnic names, a New Rome was built to complement the Elder one, so that all could be called Romans after the common name of such great cities, and have the same faith and the same name for it. And just as they received that most noble name from Christ, so too did they take upon themselves the national (ethnikon) name [i.e., of Roman]. And everything else was common to them: magistracies, laws, literature, city councils, law courts, piety itself; so that there was nothing that was not common to those of Elder and New Rome. But O how things have changed!*⁴³

This is the most explicit statement I have been able to find that the period of late antiquity, defined by Akropolites as that following the foundation of New Rome, was characterized by a unique set of religious, national, political, legal, and even literary modes and orders. Still, Akropolites probably believed that the Italians had deviated from that ancient cultural order while the Byzantines had not.

Even Christian history, then, already one thousand years old by the middle of the middle Byzantine period, could be perceived as discontinuous, though on different grounds by different writers. We saw how Byzantine historians represented these changes on the political and cultural level. Hagiographic compilations of the middle period also reveal on the one hand “a detached historical and scholarly interest in previous periods, while, on the other hand, the efforts to render saints’ Lives more accessible stem from the desire . . . to preserve the memory of the saints and to promote their cult.” The point at which “the Byzantines began to draw a line between the age of the saints and their present time” coincided with the reign of Herakleios (610–641 A.D.), that is, more or less where modern historians place the end of late antiquity.⁴⁴ This coincided with other major rifts; for instance Konstantinos VII Porphyrogennetos noted that after Herakleios the emperors “Hellenized to a great degree [i.e., began to use Greek regularly] and cast off their ancestral Roman language,” that is, Latin.⁴⁵ This development, of course, was independent of the change in hagiography noted above, because the saints’ lives had not been written in Latin to begin with. We are dealing, then, with independently overlapping

⁴³ Georgios Akropolites, *Against the Latins* 2.27, in *Georgii Acropolitae opera*, ed. A. Heisenberg, rev. P. Wirth (Stuttgart, 1978), 2: 64.

⁴⁴ C. Rapp, “Byzantine Hagiographers as Antiquarians, Seventh to Tenth Centuries,” *ByzF* 21 (1995): 31–44, here 31 and 44.

⁴⁵ Konstantinos VII Porphyrogennetos, *On the Themes* I pref., in *Costantino Porfirogenito de Thematribus*, ed. A. Pertusi (Vatican City, 1952), 60.

interests in different aspects of the past, which was possible because of the sheer complexity of Byzantine culture and the diverse origins of its constituent parts. Still this coincidence indicates a general awareness that something important had changed in the reign of Herakleios for both saints and emperors.

The scholarly interest in previous periods could be placed in the service of less “detached” pious goals. The tenth-century author of the life of St. Andreas the Fool practiced a “deliberate historicism, as he attempted to create a work set in the fifth-century reign of the emperor Leo I.” For example, he cites no source written after the fifth century and avoids mentioning any building put up after that age, all in all “so successfully that modern scholarship has only recently and with considerable effort been able to prove the existence of certain anachronisms with respect to the architectural development of the capital.”⁴⁶ Apocalyptic literature in particular is a breeding ground for both historicist fiction and scholarship. Forgery, to use an ugly word, makes full use of scholarly methods; its goals, however, are different. The forger tries to keep one step ahead of the critic—on the latter’s own ground. The chase may last for centuries and the fraud may prove more persuasive than the truth.⁴⁷ A number of Byzantine theologians responded passionately to the Platonist scholar Porphyrios’s demonstration that the book of Daniel was a Maccabean creation and not what it claimed to be, a prophecy of the Babylonian age (Porphyrios also proved that the revelations of Zoroaster were a recent forgery).⁴⁸ And a certain Theodoros the presbyter argued in favor of the authenticity of the treatises of pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite against the claims of unknown detractors who had insisted, among other things, that the ecclesiastical environment presupposed in those works was not compatible with their putative early date. It would seem, then, that these forgers were more popular in Byzantium than their critics, whose arguments, unlike the works of pseudo-Dionysios, did not circulate much or survive. Photios, by contrast, our sole source for Theodoros, seems unimpressed by the arguments for authenticity, because he writes nothing about them.⁴⁹

Forgery is an exciting site for the study of historicism, but we should probably be looking more broadly into hagiography. Many vitae were

46 P. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley, 1985), 8, 126–27. See also L. Rydén, “The Date of the Life of Andreas Salos,” *DOP* 32 (1978): 127–55. For an example from polemical literature, see D. M. Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew* (Philadelphia, 1994), 158.

47 For the theme in general, see A. Grafton, *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (Princeton, 1990).

48 Porphyrios, *Against the Christians* frag. 43, in *Porphyrios, “Gegen die Christen,” 15 Bücher* (Berlin, 1916), 67–73. For discussion, see Wilken, *Christians*, 137–43 (above, n. 34); Zoroaster: Porphyrios, *Life of Plotinos* 16.

49 Photios, *Bibliothèque cod. 1*, trans. N. G. Wilson, *Photius: The Bibliotheca: A Selection* (London, 1994), 26–27. For forgery in antiquity in general, see W. Speyer, *Die literarische Fälschung im heidnischen und christlichen Altertum: Ein Versuch ihrer Deutung* (Munich, 1971), esp. 195–99 for early Byzantium.

written about saints who lived in the past, sometimes the distant past, which afforded many opportunities for historical imagination and literary elaboration. As far as I know, Byzantine hagiography has not been studied systematically from this point of view, but the evidence that could be used is actually abundant. Consider, for instance, the life of John Chrysostomos ascribed to Georgios, patriarch of Alexandria in the early seventh century. Georgios has John travel to Athens to complete his studies in about 367. While there, he debates with the city's leading pagan notables and manages to effect some conversions. It would be reasonable to dismiss this episode as fictional, on the grounds that it reflects the *topos* of study in Athens (modeled, for instance, on Gregorios of Nazianzos), mirrors St. Paul's speech to the pagan philosophers on the Areopagus, and gives in to the irresistible temptation to have the Christian orator defeat pagan intellectuals on their home ground. But one scholar has defended the historicity of this account on the basis of authenticating contemporary signs, for instance the motivation of one quasi-pagan prefect, who hints that he is only outwardly a Christian to conform with the religion of the emperors and so obtain public office (the fact that there were two emperors is also true to the date). This policy reflects the circumstances of the mid-fourth century far better than those of the early seventh. In addition, the Parthenon is said to be flourishing as a pagan temple of Athena, whereas in the seventh century it was a church of the Mother of God. Other examples may be cited, though so too obvious anachronisms (which may, according to this argument, have crept into the account at a later date).⁵⁰

The problem is that we lack standards by which to evaluate the relative merits of historicity, invention, and historicism in such debates about specific texts, precisely because these questions have not yet been subject to systematic analysis. For instance, deliberate historicism in the service of literary invention may easily be mistaken for historicity, and vice versa. Nor need we assume that each hagiographer followed a single rule in this matter throughout each *vita*. The fifth-century author of the *Life and Miracles of Thekla*, for example, tries in some respects to capture the post-Apostolic context of his heroine, but sometimes he violates this recreation by introducing the technical terminology of post-Nicene theology.⁵¹

Let us then turn to a different and seemingly more relevant body of evidence, the Byzantine historians. However, there is in fact little evidence for this aspect of the historical sense in their works, which may seem paradoxical at first sight, especially because historiography has long been regarded as the most successful and competent genre of Byzantine research. This paradox is largely removed when we consider that the most able and thoughtful among them wrote contemporary narratives and therefore had little reason to comment on the stages of

50 Georgios of Alexandria, *Life of Ioannes Chrysostomos* 4, in *Douze récits byzantins sur Saint Jean Chrysostome*, ed. F. Halkin (Brussels, 1977), 69–285, here 82–84. For a discussion, see F. R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization*, c. 370–529, 2nd ed. (Leiden, 2001), I: 295–303, 333–41.

51 Johnson, *The Life and Miracles of Thekla*, 33–35, 43, 62 (above, n. 39).

world history or on the distant past. But the correct principles were in place there too. Agathias, historian of the wars of the 550s as well as a poet and lawyer, noted charitably that one should judge decisions “by the original circumstances of the event and not by its later outcome,” that is, one should correct for the historians’ hindsight.⁵² And we saw above in the case of Attaleiates that the “alien” past was not necessarily subordinated to the outlook of the present, but often the opposite: Attaleiates looks to the pagan past to find a model for the Byzantines to emulate in their present crisis, and in doing so he is willing to go considerably beyond what many scholars have taken to be the rather limited intellectual horizon of the Byzantines. Indeed, when historians say such things as that “the Byzantines could not transcend their mentality,”⁵³ they mean one of two things: either that the Byzantines could not transcend what scholar *x* believes their “mentality” was, in which case the claim is almost always wrong; or else the claim is true, but it is a vacuous tautology.

For example, many today believe that the classical tradition was for the Byzantines only a source of rhetorical expression that never affected the way in which they thought. The “content” of that thought was always fundamentally Byzantine, even if the “form” seemed classical. Byzantine scholars, we are asked to believe, were educated in the classics but somehow managed not to absorb a single idea or insight from that education that called into question their commitment to the autocratic, theocratic, and superstitious beliefs that are usually posited as the basis of their own Byzantine “mentality.” But the tide is turning against such monolithic constructs. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the mentality of the Byzantines was almost as flexible as their politics and that dissent was often inspired by the modes and orders of previous historical eras. Far from being a trivial or purely rhetorical exercise, the classical tradition preserved and made accessible the fundamental alternatives of politics and philosophy.

For example, on the basis of his research into the Roman Republican tradition, the sixth-century antiquarian and bureaucrat Ioannes Lydos postulated the Republic as Rome’s sole age of “freedom,” compared to which the regime of the Caesars was a steadily deteriorating tyranny. His view was based on a division of Roman history into periods, each with its own characteristic style of rule brought into being by specific circumstances and personalities.⁵⁴ Lydos was not alone in this. Setting

52 Agathias, *The Histories* 4.26.6, ed. R. Keydell, *Agathiae Myrinaei Historiarum Libri Quinque* (Berlin, 1967), 157.

53 C. Mango, “Diabolus Byzantinus,” *DOP* 46 (1992): 215–23, here 221.

54 Ioannes Lydos, *On Powers or The Magistracies of the Roman State*, ed. and trans. A. C. Bandy (Philadelphia, 1983), on which see A. Kaldellis, “Republican Theory and Political Dissidence in Ioannes Lydos,” *BMGS* 29 (2005): 1–16.

aside the pagan critic of monarchy Zosimos (ca. 500), some twelfth-century historians also broke ideologically with Byzantine monarchy, especially with the form that it took under the Komnenoi. One of them, Ioannes Zonaras, was influenced here by his own researches into the Republic.⁵⁵ In the eleventh century, the historian, philosopher, and courtier Michael Psellos had unfavorably compared the regime of Konstantinos IX Monomachos to the Athenian democracy, which he apparently considered “well-regulated,” though the exact point of his comparison is not clear.⁵⁶ In other words, it was only because of their classical *paideia* that many Byzantines could even imagine the fundamental alternatives. A similar argument has been made about the orator and philosopher of the early empire Dion Chrysostomos (ca. 100) who, despite living under a monarchical regime, managed to “accurately portray a democratic world . . . imaginatively and consistently. Whatever the correspondences with the complex realities of the day, the themes and the language in the story are classical, or classically inspired.”⁵⁷ The citation of Dion in the context of the present argument is not arbitrary or purely comparative, in that he received roughly the same classical education as his Byzantine counterparts would a thousand years later. It is now time to explain more precisely how this education contributed to the historical sense.

The greatest contribution to the historical sense made by the obsession with the classics in Byzantium was probably not philosophical and it certainly was not political. It was linguistic. Many Byzantine writers aimed to imitate classical prose and purify their language of any post-classical, demotic, or Latin taint. Accordingly the quality of their Atticism was the mark of their culture (or of their “barbarism,” depending on how the results were judged). Obviously there was considerable variation here, and different standards were championed in different periods and by different scholars. Still, especially with regard to rhetoric, Byzantinists are right to “often complain that Byzantine literature is so addicted to classical citation that it is infuriatingly vague and timeless, with such little unequivocal reference to historical figures and events that, in the absence of external evidence, texts transmitted anonymously are almost impossible to date.”⁵⁸ Even for native speakers of Greek, this effect is still difficult to achieve. It requires many years of training and practice. The effort to compose and declaim in a

55 See P. Magdalino, “Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine *Kaiserkritik*,” *Speculum* 58 (1983): 326–46.

56 Michael Psellos, *Chronographia* 6.134, ed. S. Impellizeri and trans. S. Ronchey, *Michele Psello: Imperatori di Bisanzio (Crono-*

grafia), 2 vols (Milan, 1984). For a study of this text, see A. Kaldellis, *The Argument of Psellos’ Chronographia* (Leiden, 1999).

57 J. Ma, “Public Speech and Community in the *Euhoicus*,” in S. Swain, ed., *Dion Chrysostom: Politics, Letters, and Philosophy* (Oxford, 2000), 108–24, here 122.

58 M. Alexiou, *After Antiquity: Greek Language, Myth, and Metaphor* (Ithaca, 2002), 104. For the imitation of antiquity in general, see H. Hunger, “On the Imitation (ΜΙΜΗΣΙΣ) of Antiquity in Byzantine Literature,” *DOP* 23–24 (1969–1970): 17–38.

purified Attic or koine was itself a creative act of linguistic anachronism that activated the classicist fiction: the contemporary world was made to disappear as author and audience temporarily entered a skillfully reconstructed illusion of antiquity where the Byzantine rhetor could play at being a new Demosthenes and cast his audience as a new “hyperattic” Assembly of Athens.⁵⁹

In other words, the very language of so much Byzantine literature spurred the historical sense by requiring the rhetor to step into the shoes of his classical models and describe the world through their terminology. This practice has given rise to the accusation of “reverse anachronism”; that is, instead of imposing the signs and values of the present upon the past, Byzantine writers distorted their own present by making it artificially seem like the classical past. There is truth in this theory, though more as a general characterization of style than as an indictment of factual representation. The theory has perhaps prematurely become a largely unchallenged doctrine in Byzantine studies, but in fact very few concrete instances have come to light where linguistic classicism distorts the facts of the case. Moreover it reflects an inadequate understanding of Byzantine classicism, which involved far more than mere verbal affectation.⁶⁰ Be that as it may, the *paideia* of most Byzantine scholars valorized the classical “stance” and mandated the avoidance of linguistic anachronism.

This brings us back to the twelfth-century novelists with whom we began, in that their recreation of antiquity was fundamentally rhetorical, especially given that it constituted the revival and imitation of an ancient genre. As literary artifacts, these novels must be read against the renewed cultivation of rhetoric in the twelfth century and its experiments in both old and new forms. As with the popularity of the novel in the period of the Second Sophistic, the genre enabled the sophists to perform their skills in new and challenging ways. Prodrornos, for instance, seems to have “planned the novel to include one rhetorical tour de force in each book.”⁶¹

A genre that is usually given little attention, the *progymnasmata*, was in fact an important forum for this kind of literary practice. *Progymnasmata* were exercises in various categories of rhetoric

59 See, e.g., Nikephoros Basilakes, *Oration for the Patriarch Nikolaos Mouzalon* 1–2, in *Nicephori Basilacae Orationes et epistolae*, ed. A. Garzya (Leipzig, 1984), 75–76.

60 The classic indictment is C. Mango, *Byzantine Literature as a Distorting Mirror: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered before the University of Oxford on 21 May 1974* (Oxford, 1975), but it never attempts to actually prove the case. For a broader view of Byzantine

classicism, see A. Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 2004), esp. chap. 1.

61 E. Jeffreys, “The Novels of Mid-Twelfth Century Constantinople: The Literary and Social Context,” in *AETOS: Studies in Honour of Cyril Mango Presented to Him on April 14, 1998*, ed. I. Ševčenko and I. Hutter (Stuttgart, 1998), 191–99, here 193; cf. 194:

“Prodrornos’ prime motivation in writing the [novel] was arguably to produce a superlative act of mimesis.” For the variety of styles and genres, see F. Meunier, “Théodore Prodrome: ‘Rhodantè et Dosiklès’; Roman grec ou roman byzantin?” *RivBiz* 1 (1991): 195–227, here 199–206, 226. For the novels as rhetorical performances, see now Roilos, *Amphoteroglossia* (above, n. 21).

that usually took their themes from Greek myth and history (a few had Christian themes). From the twelfth century we have over fifty by Nikephoros Basilakes and about half a dozen by Nikephoros Chrysoberges, but it is likely that most educated Byzantines would have written them as part of their training. Some take the form of what so-and-so would say in a specified unforeseen or unlikely circumstance and required that the orator put himself in the position of a Greek god, hero, or historical figure and speak accordingly.⁶² A recent study of the rhetorical curriculum of the early empire and late antiquity has brought attention to the important role of history in this mode of education: “It is generally accepted that ancient historiography is in some sense rhetorical; what is interesting here is that ancient rhetoric turns out to be so historical. History was at the center of a young man’s training: . . . One could not learn how to argue without learning how to argue about history.” Under the formal category of “narrative,” the rhetor Ailius Theon had discussed the art of credibility: “In order for the narrative to be credible, one should include words that are suitable for the characters, the actions, the places, and the times.”⁶³ More or less the same curriculum and textbooks were used later in Byzantium. For example, Psellos attests that some accused Heliodoros, the ancient author of the novel *Aithiopika*, of not making his lead character “Charikleia’s speech sound womanly or feminine but, contrary to the art (*technē*), her language has been raised to a more sophistic tone.” But Psellos defends Heliodoros by placing the character in her proper—and pagan—context: “I myself do not know how to praise this adequately. The author has not introduced a character like ordinary girls, but an initiate and one who comes from Pythian Apollo; hence most of her lamentations contain oracles.”⁶⁴ Rhetorical education, then, included instruction in historicist imagination, to the degree that the world was known to have changed in important ways since classical times.

The pagan *progymnasmata* are of interest because the orator had to immerse himself completely in the role, remove anachronisms from his language and thinking, and render a convincing (and titillating) account of, say, how Zeus gazed amorously at Io (the cow) or how Pasiphae fell in love with the bull. The pagan flavor of these pieces is

62 For the later texts, see A. Pignani, ed., *Niceforo Basilace: Progimnasmata e monodie* (Naples, 1983); and F. Widmann, “Die Progymnasmata des Nikephoros Chrysoberges,” *BNJ* 12 (1935–1936): 12–41, 241–299. For *progymnasmata* in general, see H. Hunger, “On the Imitation of Antiquity,” 19–21; and *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, 2 vols (Munich, 1978), 1: 92–120; for their literary artistry,

A. Littlewood, “A Byzantine Oak and its Classical Acorn: The Literary Artistry of Geometres, Progymnasmata 1,” *JÖB* 29 (1980): 133–44; Roilos, *Amphoteroglossia*, 32–40 (above, n. 21).

63 C. A. Gibson, “Learning Greek History in the Ancient Classroom: The Evidence of the Treatises on Progymnasmata,” *CP* 99 (2004): 103–29, here 116 and 120; Roilos, *Amphoteroglossia*, 62–63 (above, n. 21).

64 Michael Psellos, “What Is the Difference between the Novels Which Deal with Charikleia and Leukippe?” 36–41, in *Michael Psellus: The Essays on Euripides and George of Pisidia and on Heliodoros and Achilles Tatius*, ed. and trans. A. R. Dyck (Vienna, 1986), 92–93.

luxuriant and unapologetic. The illusion is, moreover, convincing, and I doubt that our classicists could easily tell that these were twelfth-century compositions. We should not dismiss progymnasmata as merely formal imitations, for we still have to explain why they were written at all, and why so well. It seems rather that they were composed precisely because they *enabled* the sophists to perform this kind of role-playing. It has been suggested that literary formalism was a pretext for the covert indulgence in erotic pleasures that were ordinarily suppressed; after all, we have to explain why *eros*, in a variety of forms and perversions, is the dominant theme of Nikephoros Basilakes' progymnasmata along with the conquest of nature by skill (*technē*)—just as in the contemporary twelfth-century novels.⁶⁵

To conclude, the historical sense is not limited to modernity, even if it is only now that History has become fundamental to all thinking about human beings and has been taken to be some kind of refutation of Truth. Be that as it may, it is to be hoped that additional research, and the removal of past prejudices, will reveal that even the most “naive” cultures had a sense of historical change and used it to good creative effect. It has been demonstrated, for instance, that the poet of *Beowulf*, who self-consciously sang of pagan heroes before a Christian audience, had a clear and sophisticated awareness of historical change and deliberately avoided anachronism, with considerable success even in the realm of archaeology.⁶⁶ The same may one day be shown about Homer too, who had a sense of how the heroic age differed from his own time and what conceptual adjustments and “material” touches were required to avoid anachronism and confer authenticity. For example, it has been suspected that Homer avoided the name Hellenes not because his own people were not yet using it in the eighth century B.C., but because he knew that the heroes had not used it in the age of Agamemnon. Thucydides' contrary inference may yet be refuted.⁶⁷

The Byzantine view of the past was complex enough to require a developed historical sense of anyone who tried to make sense of it. We have examined various ruptures that the Byzantines recognized in the historical continuum of their own past—whether political, religious, ecclesiastical, or linguistic—and some of the ways in which they coped with them or exploited them for their own purposes. This does not mean, of course, that every Byzantine writer was at all times aware of all these factors. It was generally one group that practiced,

65 H.-G. Beck, *Das byzantinische Jahrtausend* (Munich, 1982), 144–47.

66 R. Frank, “The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History,” in *Beowulf: A Prose Translation*, ed. N. Howe, trans. E. T. Donaldson (New York, 2002), 98–111.

67 See J. Hall, *Hellenicity: Between Ethnicity and Culture* (Chicago, 2002), 125–26. For archaizing elements in Homer, see B. B. Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (Cambridge, 1991), 190–91. For Homer as “archaeologist,” see J. Latacz,

Troy and Homer: Towards a Solution of an Old Mystery, trans. K. Windle and R. Ireland (Oxford, 2004).

say, linguistic hyper-Atticism and another that produced apocalyptic forgeries. A synoptic picture has been presented here that, for reasons of space, has fused periods, genres, and cultural groups. Also, just because they were capable of making historicist distinctions in certain contexts, this does not mean that the outlook of the Byzantine authors was fundamentally historicist as ours is. Byzantine historians knew from history that much had changed, so they made the necessary adjustments. Rhetors inherited and mostly followed an educational system from antiquity that stressed Atticism and classical role-playing, but this does not mean that they conceptualized what they were doing as a historicist exercise. They would probably have readily understood the notion were it explained to them, but ultimately they valorized the linguistic aspect of their work, not anything historical. In short, many Byzantines were capable of historicism either because it was part of their training or because they knew history well or were sufficiently intelligent or motivated by controversy, not because they had a developed theory of historical change or were committed to a historicist paradigm. Here we can locate the difference: it is not true that only modern thinkers are capable of historicism, but only they operate in an intellectual environment defined by it. Historicism for the Byzantines was a skill that became useful in certain contexts, not an outlook on life and history.

The articulated nature of Byzantine culture, different sites of which were governed by Christian, Roman, and Greek elements in various combinations and permutations, required a flexible mentality capable of deciding on a case-by-case basis what to accept and what to reject. This applied both to the Old Testament, a part of Scripture yet linked to the past of the Jewish nation, as well as to Greek *paideia*, which was both the essence of a good education and the carrier of all that the Church condemned. The past was always relevant to the present, but its precise validity was a matter for ongoing and often contentious debate.

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